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ABSTRACT

When a Japanese speaks to an American, the former changes his concepts into signs with associations based on Japanese culture, while the latter translates those signs into concepts with associations based on American culture. Thus, without understanding American patterns of association, no Japanese can communicate with an American effectively unless the American happens to understand Japanese culture. When an American and a Japanese communicate and the American takes the initiative, the Japanese is frightened at the prospect of being communicatively invaded. If the Japanese takes the initiative, the American is annoyed at the prospect of never getting beyond formalities. The Japanese is at a disadvantage in such a situation, since the traditional isolation and homogeneity of his/her country has encouraged the development of communicative conventions that do not lend themselves to intercultural contexts. Several theories of cross-cultural communication are briefly discussed, communication between the two cultures is schematized in several diagrams, and a number of the cultural aspects of Japanese and American communication are listed. (JB)

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DIFFICULTY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

——Between Americans and Japanese——

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DIFFICULTY OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

——Between Americans and Japanese——

KENJI KITAO

The purpose of language is communication.[2] Full communication cannot be accomplished by language alone.[3] It is accomplished by language and gestures according to the speakers' sociocultural pattern.[4] Edward T. Hall and William Foote Whyte asserted that "the communication pattern of a given society is part of its total culture pattern and can only be understood in that context."[5] Thus, without a shared understanding of a cultural background, nobody can communicate well with anyone else, even if he is adroit at manipulating language.

The Japanese people have many opportunities to communicate with other people who have different cultural backgrounds, because of the development of the Japanese economy and expansion of internationalization.[6] As these opportunities have increased, they have encountered more misunderstandings and other problems with those people, including the Americans. And since Japanese people meet Americans more frequently than any others, they encounter more problems with them.

The purpose of English learning for Japanese people should be communication with English-speaking people, but there is a big communication gap even between Japan and the United States, which is the country in closest contact with Japan. More effective intercultural communication is necessary. The writer would like to analyze

how it could be improved in terms of culture.

Communication entails understanding people and expressing oneself to people by verbal and nonverbal means. When someone has a concept to express, he changes that concept into verbal or nonverbal signs, and the other person hears, sees, or feels those signs and interprets them to get the concept. If this listener's concept is the same as the speaker's, the communication is successful, and the listener can understand the speaker well.

If the listener does not understand the speaker's concept—if he has been unable adequately to comprehend the intended meaning of the speaker's communication signs—the communication has failed. For example, if a Japanese speaker says "rice cake (*mochi*)," an American listener understands "rice" and "cake," but unless he has seen or tasted *mochi*, he can hardly imagine what it is really like. It is almost impossible to translate signs into concepts unless one had experienced whatever the concepts refer to or has knowledge about them.

Thus, even if the Japanese people do know a great deal more about the United States and her people than they do about other countries, their knowledge is limited, and they do not know much about what most Americans experience in daily life, school life, and so forth. Nor do they understand the patterned behaviors that Americans have learned unconsciously, such as ways of thinking, value systems, logic, and so forth. Therefore, when Japanese people in the United States encounter new and different situations, they have trouble understanding them. This is one of the biggest barriers to good communication. If people do not share the same experiences or knowledge, their efficiency of communication is limited.

Culture also affects communication indirectly through association. Each individual has associations based on his knowledge and experi-

ence, and his surroundings make up an important part of his associations.

Association is always used in communication when signs are converted into meanings and when meanings are converted into signs. Association is concerned with culture. Speakers do not give enough signs to convey all of their concepts alone, but rely on listeners' associations to add information when they interpret signs. Therefore, they can convey many meanings with only a few signs. But since the Japanese and Americans do not always have similar associations, they sometimes misunderstand each other.

When two Japanese people talk, the speaker changes his concept into signs, and the listener interprets those signs into his own concept. There is usually not much difference between their concepts, and they do not misunderstand each other as far as culture is concerned because both have similar associations based on Japanese culture, and such associations work when they change their concept into communication signs and vice versa (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TWO JAPANESE PEOPLE

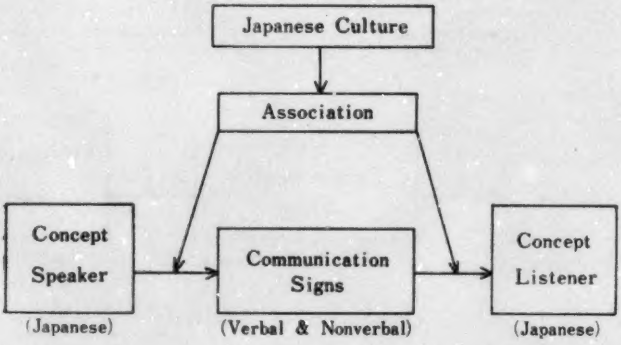
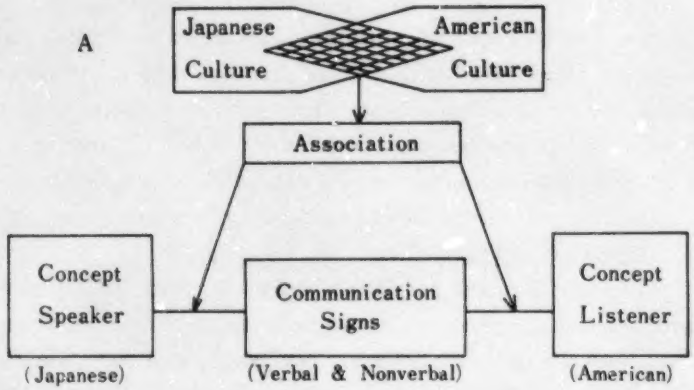
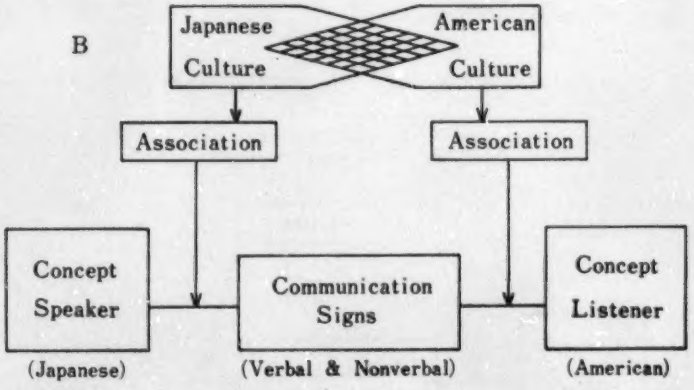


FIGURE 2

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN A JAPANESE AND AN AMERICAN





However, if a speaker is Japanese and his listener is American (or vice versa), the speaker changes his concept into signs with association based on Japanese culture and the listener translates those signs as a concept with association based on American culture. If they are talking about something in which the cultures overlap, there is understanding (Figure 2-A) but if they are not, then they misunderstand each other (Figure 2-B), (unless at least one of the two understands the other's culture adequately.)

Thus, without understanding the American patterns of association, no Japanese can communicate with an American effectively unless the American happens to understand Japanese culture. A Japanese hears "breakfast," which he translates as *asagohan* or *choshoku* in Japanese, and may imagine a bowl of boiled rice without salt or sugar, a bowl of soybean soup, seaweed, a raw egg, some pickles, and green tea. This association of the term "breakfast" is very different from an American breakfast, traditionally cereal, bacon and eggs, toast, orange juice, and coffee, milk, or tea. Even the American's tea is different, being black instead of green. If a Japanese translates a sentence into English literally, it may not always make sense to Americans because it may reflect Japanese traditions, which most Americans do not find in the United States and are not familiar with. For example, if somebody translates the phrase "*ita-ni tsuku*" into "stick to the board," Americans do not understand the original meaning at all. That phrase comes from *Nihon Buyo* (Japanese dancing), and good dancers do not lift their feet from the wooden floor at all, and thus, "*ita-ni tsuku*" means "their feet are always sticking to the wooden floor," that is, "dancing well." At present it is used even apart from dancing, and it means "the part he plays suits him well."[7] Besides social environments, natural environments affect association too. For example, the opposite of

"mountain" in the Japanese language is "sea," but is "valley" in English. Different value systems may interpret the sense of a sentence in opposite ways—for example, the proverb "a rolling stone gathers no moss" has a neagtive value in Japan but a positive value for many in the United States.

Tetsuya Kunihiro explained the structure of associations with reference to Clark, Deese and Lyons.[8] He divided association into two main types: word association, which links stimulus-response words, and cultural association, which links a word with its cultural connotation.

He then divided word association into paradigmatic and syntagmatic associations. Clark explained these two as follows: paradigmatic association has three rules: (1) the minimal contrast rule-association of words that make a direct contrast in meaning like "boy" and "girl," (2) the marking rule—association of words between marked and unmarked like "dog" and "dogs," and (3) the feature-deletion and -addition rules—association between super-ordinate words and hyponyms like "fruit" and "apples," "oranges," etc.

The syntagmatic association of words in sequences has the selectional feature realization rule and idiom completion rule. The former is the association among actors, actions and objects, or nouns and adjectives like "neigh" and "horse," and "rancid" and "oil." The latter is the association in a group of words, like "cottage" and "cheese," and "ham" and "eggs."

Cultural association is of two types. One is sentence association, and through this native speakers may be able to guess a speaker's age, sex, social class, and occupation from his sentence. The other is indicative association, which is strongly related to history, legend, customs, etc.: an example would be "horn-rimmed glasses."

Paradigmatic association is not so different in English and in Japanese. However, Japanese people are not familiar with association according to either of the rules of syntagmatic association. Japanese people have the biggest trouble in cultural association because they are not familiar with the background culture of English-speaking people.

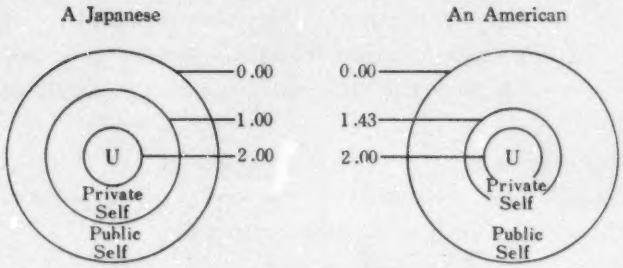
Culture determines how much speakers reveal of themselves—in other words, topics of conversations and ways of expressing themselves, as well as ways of interpreting meaning from signs.

Dean C. Barnlund compared how much the Japanese and the Americans reveal themselves in communication.[9] Barnlund analyzed speakers and classified them into three categories in terms of communication: the unconscious portion, the Private Self, and the Public Self. The unconscious portion is never comprehended by anybody, and so this refers to the nearly inaccessible unconscious assumptions and impulses that motivate behavior. The Private Self refers to the parts of the person that are potentially communicable, but whether or not they are communicated depends greatly on the circumstances. The Public Self indicates those aspects of experience that are available and easily shared with other people. People usually intentionally reveal only their Public Self in communication.

According to Barnlund, as shown in Figure 3, Americans have a bigger Public Self but a smaller Private Self than do Japanese. Barnlund proposed the following guide-lines for Japanese and Americans when they communicate with those of their own nationalities.

FIGURE 3

PRIVATE SELF AND PUBLIC SELF



Source: Barnlund, p. 63.

Japanese Communication

1. Japanese interact more selectively and with fewer people.
2. Japanese prefer regulated over spontaneous forms of communication.
3. Across a variety of topics Japanese communicate verbally on a more superficial level and with a lower degree of personal involvement.
4. Japanese show a reluctance for physical, as well as verbal intimacy.
5. Japanese resort to defensive reactions sooner and in a greater number of topical areas.
6. Japanese, because they explore their inner reactions less often and at more superficial levels, may be less known to themselves.[10]

American Communication

1. Americans communicate with a larger number of persons and less selectively.
2. Americans prefer more spontaneous forms of communication.

3. Americans communicate their experience on a deeper and more personal level across a variety of topics.
4. Americans seek physical as well as verbal intimacy; since fuller expression of the self is sought they may utilize more channels of communication to do it.
5. Americans, since threat is proportional to the amount of self concealment, are less defensive with fewer persons and in fewer topical areas.
6. Americans expose their inner reactions more frequently and with a greater variety of persons and are better known to themselves.[11]

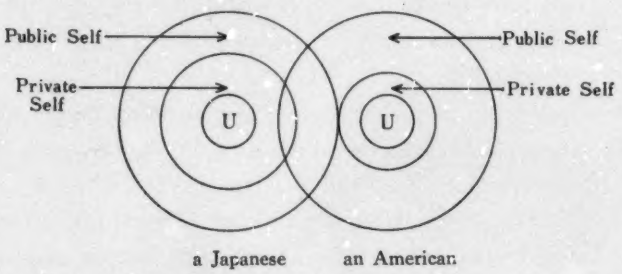
When an American and a Japanese communicate and the American takes the initiative, he tries to communicate with the entire depth of his American Public Self, and the Japanese is frightened at the prospect of being communicatively invaded (Figure 4-A). On the other hand, if the Japanese takes the initiative, the American is annoyed at the prospect of never getting beyond formalities (Figure 4-B). The cues that were impeccable guides to teaching within each of their cultures have become obstacles to the comprehension of messages from other cultures.

Culture affects communication in other ways too, such as physical contact, time, place, human relations, and sex. "It determines time and timing of interpersonal events, the places where it is appropriate to discuss particular topics, the physical distance separating one speaker from another, the tone of voice that is appropriate to the subject matter."[12] Hall suggested that a Primary Message System had ten aspects: interaction, association, subsistance, bisexuality, territoriality, temporality, learning, play, defense, and exploitation.[13] Except the first, all the aspects of the Primary Message System are nonlinguistic

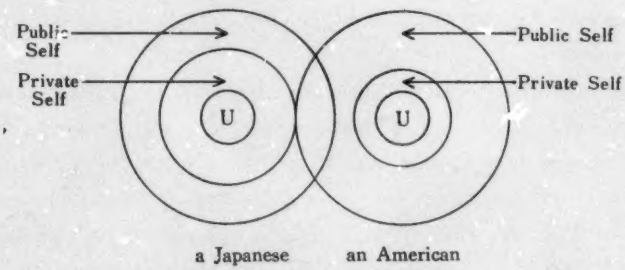
parts of the communication process. Culture decides topics, places, with whom to communicate, the degree, the ways, etc., in communication. That is, almost nothing can be communicated without culture. Each behavior pattern of a speaker tells as much as or more than overt

FIGURE 4
JAPANESE AND AMERICAN STYLE COMMUNICATIONS

A. American Style Communication



B. Japanese Style Communication



speech, and understanding functions of behavior patterns will reveal the covert communication system.

Another difference in communication between the Japanese and

the Americans is the methods of communication, as Michihiro Matsumoto explained.[14] What he pointed out is that Americans always like to ask yes or no, and Japanese sometimes prefer to choose neither of them, which is not admissible in English. He also asserted that the Japanese could not always distinguish facts and opinions. He concluded that the Japanese people could not debate because they did not distinguish people, opinions, and facts clearly; for example, authorized people or people in power sometimes say "A is B, because I say so." Therefore if a person does not agree with a fact or an opinion that means he disagrees with the speaker. Shigehiko Toyama pointed out that Japanese people talked less than Americans and for the Japanese it was better to use few words. They set high value on *haragei* (psychological interpretation in silence) and *ishindenshin* (telepathy).[15] Haruhiko Kindaichi, scholar of the Japanese language, pointed out that among the Japanese people there was the tendency to feel that it was good not to talk much and not to write much.[16] Of course it is not a good way of communicating with the Americans.

The reason why the Japanese people can communicate with each other in silence is that no other country of similar size is as homogeneous as Japan in terms of race, ethnic groups, and language. This is very convenient for Japanese communication, but it causes a communication gap between the Japanese and Americans, as Masao Kunihiro has pointed out.[17] The Japanese people have fewer opportunities to meet foreigners than the Americans. The Japanese seldom encounter foreign culture in Japan, and they often have cultural shocks when they meet people with different cultures. Nakane estimated that it would take only three years for American businesmen to learn to work with Japanese people in Japan without much trouble: however, it would take five years for Japanese people to learn to work with natives

abroad smoothly.[18]

Another problem of Japanese people is that they apply the techniques of internal communication directly in external communication.[19] The Japanese are still not used to distinguishing intercultural communication from regular communication.

In summary, the purpose of language use is communication. Communication is more difficult among people with different cultures than those with the same, just as it is among people with different languages. Knowing other cultures and experiencing them improves communication with the people who have those cultural backgrounds. Culture affects communication indirectly through association. Thus, culture strongly limits the contents of communication. Culture also determines levels of communication, that is, how much speakers reveal of themselves. The ways of communication vary according to cultures. The Japanese and the Americans have different logic and methods of expressing themselves. Culture also relates to other means of communication, such as physical contact, time, place, human relations, and sex. Therefore, communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds effectively is very difficult without knowing their covert communication systems. Moreover, the Japanese have a disadvange in intercultural communication because they are homogeneous in terms of race, culture, and language. Although with compatriots they can communicate well even in silence, they are not used to intercultural communication and do not distinguish it from their own.

Now it is clear that language alone cannot guarantee good intercultural communication. If the purpose of learning a language is communication, people should learn how to communicate well with speakers of that language. Only experience and training can make better intercultural communication.[20] Culture affects intercultural

communication so strongly that, inevitably, it is necessary to teach culture along with language instruction. Understanding the target culture is extremely important, and an effective way of doing this is understanding the differences between the native and target cultures.

NOTES

1. This article first appeared in my doctoral dissertation, " The Teaching of American Culture in English Courses in Japan, " which I submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Kansas.
2. Minoru Umegaki, *Nichi-Ei Hikaku Hyōgen Ron* (Comparative Study of Japanese and English Expressions). (Tokyo: Taishūkan Shoten, 1975), p. 5.
3. John C. Condon said that studies showed that only 30 percent of the meaning in a conversation was clearly conveyed with language and that a recent investigation cut that to only 10 percent.

   John C. Condon, " Ibunka-kan Communication Nyūmon, 1 (An Introduction to Intercultural Communication, 1) *Kokusai Communication* (International Communication) (July, 1976), p. 48.
4. Mary Finocchiaro, *Teaching English as a Second Language*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), p. 97.
5. Edward T. Hall and William Foote Whyte, " Intercultural Communication, " *Human Organization*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring, 1960). Reprinted in *Basic Readings in Communication Theory*, ed. by C. David Mortensen (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1973), p. 308.
6. Chie Nakane, *Tekiō-no Jōken* (Conditions of Adjustment), (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1972), pp. 3–4.
7. Fumi Modokoro, *Eigo-ni Naranai Nihongo* (Japanese Expressions Which Cannot Be Translated into English), (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1971),, p. 10.
8. Tetsuya Kunihiro, " Rensō-no Kōzō (Structure of Associations), " *Eigo Kyōiku* (The English Teacher's Magazine), Vol. XXII, No. 1 (April, 1973), pp. 8–11.

   H. H. Clark, " Word Association and Linguistics Theory, " in *New Horizons in Linguistics*, ed. by John Lyons (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1970).

   James Deese, *The Structure of Associations in Language and Thought*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965).

   John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
9. Dean C. Barnlund, " The Public Self and Private Self in Japan and the United States, " in *Intercultural Encounters with Japan: Contact and Conflict*, ed. by John

C. Condon and Mitsuko Saito (Tokyo: The Simul Press, 1974), pp. 43–49.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.
12. Hall and Whyte, *op. cit.*, p.. 296.
13. Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language*. (New York: Anchor, Press, 1959), pp. 36–39.
14. Michihiro Matsumoto, "Eigo-no Motsu Ronri (Logic in English)," *Eigo Kyōiku*, Vol. XXV, No. 1 (April, 1976), pp. 25–27.
15. Shigehiko Toyama, "Eigo-no Ronri. Nihongo-no Ronri (Logic in English and Logic in Japanese)," *Eigo Kyōiku*, Vol. XXV. 1 (April, 1976), p. 20
16. Haruhiko Kindaichi, *Nihonjin-no Gengo Hyogen* (Japanese People's Verbal Expressions), (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1975), p. 15.
17. Masao Kunihiro, "U.S. -Japan Communication," in *Discord in the Pacific: Challenges to the Japanese-American Alliance*, ed. by Henry Rosovsky (Washington, D. C.: Columbus Books, Inc. Publishers, 1972), p. 157.
18. Nakane, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
19. Masao Kunihiro, *op. cit.*, p. 157.
20. Nakane, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

Selected Haiku
from
THE KAMO RIVER

STEPHEN WOLFE

1
seasonless night
numberless, numbed
by incense of death

2
young, green stalks
bend over backwards
for the wind

3
eyes scanning
his under-the-bridge empire;
hobo autumn

4
sunlit web
on the gravestone

5
at first sign
of first snow
some birds head south

6
cocoon
on an off-season cherrytree